

INNOVATIONS IN INDIGENOUS HOUSING IN QUEENSLAND

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1. Introduction

There have been a number of significant changes in the techniques and materials used in the construction of houses in Australia over the years. According to Harman (1991) this seems to be at odds with the conservative image which is normally associated with the housing industry. Harman (1991) argues that there is nothing unusual in the apparent conflict between conservatism and innovation which is a fundamental characteristic of the battle for existence in a dynamic environment, whether in the context of the biological evolution of species or the housing industry.

Some of the factors which have influenced innovations in Indigenous housing include:

- imposition of Euro-centric housing values on Indigenous people;
- acknowledgment of the adverse impact of government policy on Indigenous people;
- research and development;
- quality improvement and new product improvement;
- international trends/sustainable development;
- the push for self management; and,
- reduction in government funding (necessity is the mother of invention).

How these factors have affected innovations in Indigenous housing will be discussed shortly. The paper starts with a brief description on housing delivery before late 1960 and then examines in detail the process of innovation, and construction materials used. It will do so by highlighting the lessons learned, and the tensions and strategies in place to maintain and sustain the pace of innovations. It will conclude with a discussion on challenges that need to be addressed to achieve effective partnerships between housing providers, Indigenous people, public and community housing agencies. At the outset an overview of housing delivery for Indigenous people will be discussed.

1. Overview of Housing Delivery for Indigenous People in Queensland

In Queensland, responsibility for the provision of housing for Indigenous people has regularly shifted from one government department to the other. Since 1992, the Department of Housing through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing has been providing housing services to Indigenous people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing provides rental housing specifically targeted to Indigenous people, which is either managed by the Queensland Department of Housing or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Councils.

One of the funding sources for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Housing (ATSIH) is the Aboriginal Rental Housing Program, which is a tied program under the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement. The Queensland Government also provides additional funding. There are essentially two major facets of Program delivery namely, the Rental Program and the Community Program.

- ***Rental Program***

In urban areas, rental housing specifically targeted to Indigenous people is constructed and managed by ATSIH. The targeted public rental housing program comprises approximately 2,700 dwellings in urban, rural and remote locations throughout Queensland.

- ***Community Program***

The community program provides a mix of capital funded responses (new dwellings, upgrades and repairs and maintenance) and recurrent funded sector support (tenancy and asset management).

An estimated 80 Indigenous Community Housing Organisations (IHO) provide housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on reserves and in urban, rural and remote centres in Queensland. The majority of these organisations are funded by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and a small number have received funding through the Queensland Department of Housing's Community Housing Program. There are 32 Deed of Grant in Trust Committees and two Aboriginal Shires in Queensland.

In October 1998, the Queensland Minister for Housing approved a Five-Year Capital Works Plan for Deed of Grant in Trust communities at a total cost of \$173.245M. The plan aims to address the total housing needs of eight communities, the communities in the Northern Peninsula Area (NPA) and the priority shortlists of the remaining 21 communities within the scope of the plan.

At the end of the five years, this plan will have addressed approximately 80% of the total need in all communities (measured as at September 1997). This will leave an estimated 20% of the need, along with emerging need, to be addressed in the following years.

In addition to ATSIH, the Queensland Department of Housing also delivers a number of other subsidised housing programs. These include Public Housing, Community Housing and Private Housing assistance. Each of these programs is open to Indigenous and Non-Indigenous households, which meets the relevant eligibility criteria.

Having presented an overview of housing delivery in Queensland, the next section will present an historical overview of innovations in Indigenous housing.

3. Innovations in Indigenous Housing: An Historical Overview

Indigenous people had organised communities prior to the arrival of Europeans. They built houses to suit their social cultural lifestyles. The layout of their communities was determined by a set of socio-cultural principles and climatic conditions rather than economic and engineering principles.

The arrival of the Europeans in Australia led to 'innovations' to the form and shape of Indigenous housing. The houses that Indigenous people occupied in the eyes of the settlers were regarded as 'indecent' and 'unsightly'. This observation was based on the failure of the settlers to understand housing within the context of Indigenous people.

Housing in the context of Indigenous people goes beyond the confines of a structure and its immediate environs; it is the whole community. Among non-Indigenous people the concept of 'home' is closely associated with our present house, or perhaps the house of parents, or our 'hometown'. Indigenous people regard their country as 'home', and invest less meaning in houses.

The introduction of reserves, missions, cattle stations and the policy of assimilation further accelerated the pace of innovations in Indigenous housing. The main thrust of these policies was to provide permanent homes for Indigenous people, and to divest them of their Indigenous values and force them into mainstream Australian life.

During the assimilation period houses were built without due regard to the preferences of Indigenous people. One director of housing stated:

We don't build houses for Aboriginals, we build houses for people, Race doesn't enter into it (cited in Heppell, 1977:5).

During this period the houses that were provided included tin sheds, humpies and shacks. Construction was of timber frames, aluminium sheets, low set timber floors, asbestos-cement floors, and fibrous cement claddings. Most of these houses had bare floors or no floor coverings at all. Indigenous people were provided with housing where they paid little or no rent at all. The consequences of these innovative housing solutions will be discussed in a moment. The next section will focus on innovations in contemporary housing.

4. Innovations in Contemporary Indigenous Housing

For the purpose of this discussion these have been itemised under the following headings: transportable homes; use of more durable materials; provision of floor coverings; development of brick and veneer; and innovative projects for the future.

- **Transportable Homes**

One of the early innovations made was the construction of transportable homes. The transportable home concept was developed to provide training for apprentices employed by ATSIH to enable them to construct houses using timber frames. This innovative approach allowed the construction and maintenance in communities of timber frame houses which are popular in Queensland.

- **Building of larger bedroom houses with more outdoor communal spaces**

Innovations led to construction of larger bedroom sizes and more outdoor communal spaces. This was in response to the recognition of the impact of the extended family arrangement and the desire for Indigenous people to use outdoor spaces.

- **Use of durable materials**

In addition use of better and more durable materials for the construction of houses for Indigenous people was in response to the incorporation of demands from the extended family arrangement on their housing needs. These durable construction materials can withstand high rates of wear and tear and increase the longevity of the houses.

- **Provision of floor coverings**

One area where the Department of Housing has taken the lead is in the provision of floor coverings. As discussed in the preceding section, most of the houses provided prior to 1960s did not have floor coverings. This had adverse health consequences on the occupants of the houses. In response to the health concerns and preferences of occupants (as expressed in post occupancy surveys) floor coverings were provided. All new houses are provided with floor coverings except in areas where polished timber floors exist.

- **Brick and veneer**

The development of brick veneer construction was a remarkable Australian breakthrough which made its mark on the style of Australian housing. Over the last six years, the Department of Housing has constructed brick veneer houses across Queensland, to meet the local community standards and character of streetscapes in areas where the houses are located.

- **Innovative projects in the future**

The Queensland Department of Housing, will be initiating a number of pilot projects to look at renewable energy. The objective of such projects is to assist in developing codes for the conservation of resources, as well as develop alternative energy sources for electric lighting, water usage and solar energy performance and capabilities across Queensland communities.

The Department has recently adopted a policy which requires that all new constructions be built to the Australian adaptable housing standard. This is an equitable and cost-effective innovation in Indigenous housing in Queensland which is driven by local, national and international factors.

Implementation of these innovations in Indigenous housing brings to the fore a myriad of lessons which can guide policy makers and housing providers in the future. It is important to review some of the lessons learned to form a basis for driving innovations in the future.

5. Lessons to be Learned from the Delivery of Housing in the Past

For analytical convenience these factors have been discussed under four main headings, namely: welfare dependency approach not sustainable; housing as a process; appropriateness of housing and active participation of Indigenous people.

- **Welfare Dependency Approach unsustainable**

Successive State, Territory and Commonwealth Governments provided housing for Indigenous people which focused on physical attributes and not the cultural preferences of Indigenous people. Housing solutions have been delivered through a framework of 'fund and forget' and 'build and abandon', with very limited success. In addition to this the direct provision in housing has created a 'welfare dependency syndrome' among Indigenous people creating a situation of perpetual paternalism.

There are two main school of thoughts on the future of welfare housing. The first school of thought argues that the welfare dependency approach must be discontinued. Noel Pearson (1999)

argues that the welfare mentality has taken over our people and has stifled the ability of Indigenous people to be masters of their own development. The second school of thought argues that since the overall quality of Indigenous housing has not improved, the welfare approach should be continued while exploring long-term opportunities to improve the housing situation.

A departure from the welfare dependency approach is both inevitable and desirable. Indigenous people will see overall development guided by a popular Chinese proverb that says "don't give me fish, teach me how to fish". However, to be able to teach somebody how to fish the person will have to have the energy to do so. The implication here is while the welfare dependency approach may not be sustainable in the long run the transition should be systematic and incremental.

- **Housing as a Process**

In the welfare dependency approach, an euro-centric view of housing regarded it as a 'packaged good'. Provide housing with all the basic services and all the problems of Indigenous people will be solved. Housing for Indigenous people was regarded as an **end** and not a *means* to an end.

Policy-makers thought they knew what type of housing Indigenous people wanted to improve their overall quality of life. The results were widespread abandonment and attrition of housing. In the process, policy makers, politicians and the academia sadly concluded that Indigenous people do not know how to live in houses. However, if Indigenous people are *properly* consulted through a systematic and an incremental process before houses are built these problems will be eliminated.

- **Recognition of Socio-Cultural Principles**

It is common knowledge that value systems of a society largely make people what they are. The identity of Indigenous people is derived by a set of socio-cultural principles. These principles impact on how space are used within and outside their homes. Housing provision has overlooked these fundamental links, and therefore implementation of innovative solutions has had limited success. Reser (1979) aptly summed it this way:

One of the single and gravest errors of past Aboriginal housing policy and implementation is ...inability on the part of planners to appreciate that the more traditional definition of reality is vastly different from a European one. (Reser, 1979: 93).

- **Active Involvement of Indigenous people in the Delivery Process**

During the past three decades there has been attempts at providing innovative and appropriate housing for Indigenous. The key to provision of appropriate housing was through consultation. While some success has been achieved in involving Indigenous people in housing provision their involvement has not been active as expected.

This is because policy makers, housing providers need to remember that helping Indigenous people means helping themselves. As one elder once said:

"if you have come to help me you may go away. But if you see our struggle as part of your survival then we can work together" –Author Unknown

Having learned some lessons from previous unsuccessful attempts to provide housing for Indigenous people there was the need for policy shifts. These policy shifts have been framed within the principles of self-determination which is the catch-cry for the future.

6. Self-Determination – The Driving Force for Innovations in housing delivery

Self-determination has attracted a number of meanings since it was applied to the genous development process. To put the discussion into perspective it is essential to understand the meaning of self-determination. The Encyclopaedia of Human Rights defines it as: "the right to decide our own political, economic, social and cultural condition". This definition covers the scope of all human endeavour and thus had principles to guide housing delivery.

Community Councils have been providing innovative housing solutions on ex-government reserves now known as (Deed of Grant In Trust Communities (DOGITs). The provision of innovative housing solutions has revealed the tensions between the government oriented and community oriented approach.

- **Government oriented**

Indigenous housing is primarily provided through grants from Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments. In addition, State and Territory governments are directly involved in the provision of housing for Indigenous people. As a result of these funding arrangements, there is always a tension between the Governments (the "providers" "regulators" and "developers") on what should be provided, how it is funded and what the communities (the beneficiaries) will prefer.

The Government agencies involved in housing provision are guided by a set of policies and procedures which determines what has to be done, when, by whom and how. Such approaches are often regarded as too restrictive, non-promotional and prescriptive which stifles application of innovative solutions to problems in the provision of housing.

Provision of housing requires performance of a number of functions, which are assigned to various Government agencies. This also creates a tension between agencies in the planning and implementation of projects since the agencies have different priorities and often operate under different Ministers. Apart from these broad tensions there are others which exist among Indigenous communities in the drive towards achieving self-determination.

- **Community-oriented**

In most communities there is always the tension between providing more housing within the limited budgetary allocations. Funding levels for housing do not reflect the extent of housing need. For example, in Queensland it is estimated that at least \$200M will be required to address the housing needs in ex-government reserves or Deed of Grant in Trust Communities out of which 173M has been allocated for the next five years. However owing to the competing needs Governments are unable to provide the funds. Councils are thus compelled to provide more housing with less money. The consequence of this tension is the provision of housing which fails to reflect the socio-cultural needs of Indigenous people.

There are attempts to respond to these tensions to improve the provision of housing. These attempts have culminated in the development of strategies at both the Commonwealth, State and Territory levels.

7. Strategies for Improving Housing Delivery

The strategies developed could be categorised into four main areas. These are: Improving community capacities; achieving joint planning; increasing inter-agency co-ordination and research and development.

i. Improving Community Capacities

In response to these problems the Commonwealth, State and Territory government have developed strategies such as the Community Housing Management Strategy (CHMS). The primary aim of the CHMS is to build and strengthen the capacities of Indigenous people to actively participated in the management of their housing. Workshops, seminars and other training sessions are organised through the CHMS to equip Communities with policy formulation, project and tenancy management skills. The strategy has enabled Councillors and housing officers to assist community members in the identification and assessment of housing needs. Implementation of this strategy will be co-ordinated through a framework which involves all peak bodies. In the case of Queensland, the Aboriginal Co-ordinating Council and the Island Co-ordinating Council who liaise closely with other Indigenous Councils.

ii. Achieving Joint Planning

Another strategy developed to ensure an integrated approach to the provision of housing which removes some of the earlier identified tensions is the development of Bilateral Agreements on housing and infrastructure. This strategy has been developed collaboratively with other State and Commonwealth agencies, and will result in the joint planning and funding housing and infrastructure.

iii. Improving Inter-Agency Co-ordination

This strategy was developed in response to a Housing Ministers Conference held in Darwin in 1996 to tackle the unco-ordinated approach to addressing Indigenous housing issues. In 1997 the Housing Ministers agreed to establish a demonstration project in selected communities. The project will trial a co-ordinated approach to improving the quality of sustainability of housing and infrastructure as a model for effectively tackling the unique problems existing in Indigenous communities. The strategy has been successfully trialed in the Northern Peninsula Area of Queensland. See Appendix One for the model for implementation of the demonstration project. The implementation of the strategy for inter-agency co-ordination on the provision of housing and infrastructure lead to savings of over \$850,000 a year. It also led to overall improvement in the quality of life of the people through the provision of appropriate housing and health facilities.

8. Challenges for the future

This paper would be incomplete if some of the challenges for the future were not presented to you, for deliberation during and after this conference. Some of the challenges that will confront us in our desire to improve the quality of life on Indigenous communities have been presented in the form of questions. These include:

- Given the dwindling resources available for the provision of housing, and the widening gap between the haves and have nots, how do we encourage both the public and private sectors to develop strategies to ensure that the needs of marginalised groups are met?;
- Do we have the capacity to encourage and sustain a partnership which will empower Indigenous people to be masters of their own destiny? Since innovative housing solutions will require active involvement of Indigenous people, housing providers should be willing to move away from a ‘developer’, ‘regulator’ model to a ‘facilitator’, ‘enabler’,

and 'promoter' model. Obviously, this approach will require changes in the way policies and programs are developed.

- What strategies are required to be developed to ensure the creation and maintenance of innovative and appropriate housing solutions for Indigenous communities in the 21st century? Given that progress in areas such as knowledge based technologies, globalisation and the push to achieve sustainable development will human settlements, it is important to put in place long term plans for the future; and,
- As housing providers we need to take the lead in showing other social service providers that have genuine interest commitment and fortitude, it can be done. Do we want to be leaders or followers in assisting in meeting the needs of excluded communities?.

Conclusion

Achieving the highest level of quality of life is the ultimate goal of humanity. The quality of life in Indigenous communities has responded to the level of investment and commitment from politicians, practitioners, government agencies and the community at large. But there is always more room for improvement. However, since there is a determination from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities to work together, I am optimistic about the future.